

Paul A. Witherspoon (1919–2012)

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The hydrologic community lost one of its most charismatic leaders with the death of Paul Witherspoon on 10 February 2012, in Berkeley, Calif. He passed away from complications brought on by his long battle with Parkinson's disease. He was 93.

Paul was a dynamic and influential research leader in hydrogeology for more than 50 years. Working from his base at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), and later from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL), he made significant contributions to the understanding of the flow of fluids in porous media and fractured rock, and he applied his findings to a diverse set of societally important issues, including the development of geothermal energy, use of underground gas storage, and siting and design of nuclear waste disposal facilities. In all these spheres of interest he emphasized the need to marry theoretical studies and field testing. He was especially passionate about the need for large-scale, in situ, underground experiments to guide and corroborate the predictions of theoretically based numerical models.

Perhaps even more importantly, he was an inspirational mentor for many years to a large number of graduate students and post-doctoral fellows who went on to develop successful research careers in their own right. Paul's circle was always populated by students and colleagues from around the world, and he reveled in their diverse cultures. To enter Paul's orbit was to experience a stimulating mix of high intelligence, deep curiosity, and love of life.

Paul was born on 9 February 1919, in Dormont, Pa. His father was a civil engineer who worked for a time for the Carnegie Coal Company, and Paul took his first trips underground into coal mines with his father. When Paul was in high school, his father started a small cable tool drilling company to drill for natural gas, and Paul often worked on the rigs. These early experiences had a direct and lasting influence on Paul's choice of career.

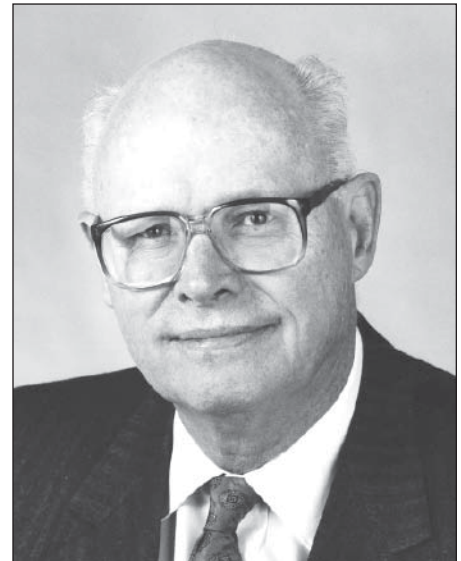
Paul graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in 1941 with a B.S. in petroleum engineering. He then worked for 8 years in various capacities for the Phillips Petroleum Company in Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas. In the fall of 1949, at the age of 30, he enrolled at the University of Kansas and graduated in 1951 with a M.Sc. in petroleum

engineering physics. Shortly afterward, Paul accepted a position as head of the petroleum engineering division of the Illinois State Geological Survey in Champaign. The survey offices were on the University of Illinois campus, and for the next 5 years, while working full time for the survey, Paul pursued a Ph.D. in the university's department of geology. His doctoral work was directed by the eminent clay mineralogist Ralph Grim, whom Paul credited as his role model in scientific life.

Paul joined the faculty in UC Berkeley's department of mineral technology in 1957. Declining enrollments in petroleum engineering prodded Paul toward research on a broader suite of geological engineering topics, especially those involving groundwater issues. Paul's experience with leaky cap rocks in underground gas storage projects led him to recognize the importance of aquitards (units of lesser permeability than aquifers) in hydrogeological systems sooner than many of his colleagues. His early research into the hydraulics of aquifer-aquitard systems was a precursor to issues that would soon arise in connection with contaminant transport problems, geothermal energy production, land subsidence, and nuclear waste isolation. He organized a seminal meeting at the Asilomar Conference Grounds, Calif., in 1971, which was the first conference to bring attention to the role of aquitards in groundwater flow systems.

In 1977, Paul became the first director of LBNL's Earth sciences division. He maintained a dual appointment with UC Berkeley and continued teaching there until 1989. At LBNL, he and his team made major contributions in geothermal reservoir engineering, numerical modeling of flow through fractured rocks, large-scale field and laboratory testing of flow and transport parameters, and the integrated assessment of the thermohydrologic and hydromechanical couplings between the flow field, stress field, and heat field in subsurface environments.

LBNL's Earth sciences division also became heavily involved in the development of viable methodologies for underground nuclear waste disposal. Paul and his team took the lead American role in the international research program at the Stripa Mine in Sweden, a project that provided the first comprehensive studies of flow and transport in fractured rock at depth. On the home front, Paul regularly offered his expertise to the U.S. Department of Energy in its



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assessment of the proposed nuclear waste site at Yucca Mountain, Nev.

Paul was widely honored for his work. He was awarded the Horton Award (now the Hydrology Award) from AGU's hydrology section and the Meinzer Award from the Geological Society of America's (GSA's) hydrogeology division. Paul also received the Horton Medal from AGU and the Distinguished Service Award from GSA. In 1989 he was elected to the U.S. National Academy of Engineering.

Paul's colleagues and graduate students also honored him with three memorable research conferences at LBNL on the occasions of his sixtieth, seventieth, and eightieth birthdays. Each conference provided a wonderful opportunity to catch up with former friends and coworkers but also turned into important venues for scientific exchange that led to highly regarded published proceedings.

Paul is survived by his wife Elizabeth and two daughters, Kathy and Claire. He was predeceased by his son, David, who was killed in a car accident in 2006 at the age of 57.

To learn more about Paul in his own words, a 2007 videotaped interview he gave is posted on the International Association of Hydrogeologists (IAH) Web site at <http://timecapsule.ecodev.ch/>. A biographical article based on the interview was published by IAH (*Hydrogeology Journal*, 16, 811–815, 2008).

—R. ALLAN FREEZE, Surrey, B. C., Canada; E-mail: freezer3@shaw.ca; IRAJ JAVANDEL, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Berkeley, Calif.; and SHLOMO P. NEUMAN, University of Arizona, Tucson